

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1           1. A method for assisting a user in selecting one or more items from an item  
2 set that best match a set of target preferences, the method comprising:  
3           obtaining information from the user about that user's set of target preferences, using  
4           direct questions;  
5           generating at least one list of items selected from the item set that will best meet the set  
6           of target preferences based on the information provided; and  
7           generating a display including the list of items and explanations for at least one item on  
8           the list of items explaining how well attributes of the at least one item match the set  
9           of target preferences.

1           2. The method of claim 1, wherein the item is a product, service or other  
2 selectable element.

1           3. The method of claim 1, wherein the information obtained from questions to  
2 the user is supplemented with other information about the user.

1           4. The method of claim 3, wherein the other information includes one or more  
2 of information provided by the user during online interactions and information provided by  
3 the user during offline interactions.

1           5. The method of claim 4, wherein the information provided by the user is one  
2 or more of registration information, information about prior selections, information about  
3 prior purchases and information about prior interactions with automated decision advisors.

1           6. The method of claim 1, further comprising a step of providing the user with  
2 explanations of recommendations, where each explanation contains at least one pro or at least  
3 one con, and the explanation refers to an attribute of the item and identifies how well the  
4 attribute meets the user's set of target preferences.

1           7. The method of claim 6, wherein one or more pro or con includes a  
2 reference to the set of target preferences.

1           8. The method of 6, further comprising generating a statement relating one or  
2 more pro or con to a matching of an attribute and a recommendation for or against an item  
3 based on indirect inferences from user inputs.

1                   9. The method of claim 8, wherein each explanation includes those pros and  
2 cons that have high estimated decision relevance to the user, and excludes at least one  
3 mention of a low estimated relevance attribute.

1                   10. The method of claim 9, further comprising a step of estimating decision  
2 relevance of an attribute to the user as an increasing function of estimated importance of the  
3 attribute to the user and an absolute relative preference value, wherein the absolute relative  
4 preference value of a given item is a measure of a difference between an attribute value for  
5 the given item and an average value of the attribute for items in the list of items other than the  
6 given item.

1                   11. The method of claim 1, further comprising generating for display to the  
2 user a list of common attributes for which all of the items on the list of items have common  
3 values.

1                   12. The method of claim 11, wherein the list of common attributes includes  
2 attributes that have values in a common range.

1                   13. The method of claim 11, wherein the list of common attributes includes  
2 pros and cons for attributes that have high estimated importance to the user and excludes at  
3 least one pro or con for at least one attribute that has a low estimated importance to the user.

1                   14. The method of claim 13, wherein one or more pro or con includes a  
2 reference to the set of target preferences.

1                   15. The method of 11, further comprising generating a statement relating one  
2 or more pro or con to a matching of an attribute and a recommendation for or against an item  
3 based on indirect inferences from user inputs.

1                   16. The method of claim 1, further comprising offering questions to the user  
2 in a sequence that is determined dynamically based on answers to previous questions.

1                   17. The method of claim 16, wherein sequence of questions, is based on a  
2 priority calculated as an increasing function of the uncertainty about the importance of the  
3 attributes to which the question pertains and the variation in attribute values among the items.

1 18. The method of claim 17, wherein the variation of attribute value among  
2 the items is weighted to the values of the items with the high current ranking so that the  
3 question priority reflects the expectation that answers to the question are likely to change the  
4 ranking of the top ranked items.

1 19. The method of claim 18, wherein the system mentions for each unmet  
2 requirements and selected combinations of requirements the number of items it or they  
3 eliminate as unacceptable.

1 20. The method of claim 1, wherein if no item meets all requirements  
2 specified by the user, the system displays a conflict page that mentions the fact that no items  
3 meet all requirements and lists the requirements that cannot be simultaneously met.